

Dear Maria Montessori

by Paula K. Greene

We live in people's hearts.

—Angeles Arrien

Dear Maria Montessori,

Seven weeks into his third-grade class in public school, my oldest son asked, "When will the teacher teach us something? It's October and I haven't had a lesson yet." Having come from both Montessori preschool and elementary classrooms, he was used to daily lessons—key experiences—demonstrated by a teacher to a group of students and explored by individuals, pairs, or small groups of students during class time. He liked his new teacher and was an excellent student, according to her, completing all assignments legibly, on time, and without errors. He did the work, but he missed the lessons—stories and scientific study that sparked his imagination—the essence of your cosmic plan for education.

I was introduced to you when I was 17 years old. Though you had passed away nearly 15 years earlier, your words and your works were being revisited and reprinted. Your teachings were being explored in new schools throughout the world. My own small-town librarian handed me *The Absorbent Mind* (Montessori 1949/1967); it was a new release on the bookshelf. I read it in one night, thrilled with your views of the absorbent and constructive nature of the young child's mind and the indelible worth of a prepared environment. Your words formed a wellspring for the thoughts I held about the nature of learning—thoughts I had been unable to express coherently.

Volunteering in a local elementary school, I witnessed teachers viewing children as empty vessels that needed filling, dismissing the wealth of perceptions and experience these students carried into their classrooms. Your view of the teacher as expert guide placed the child at the center of his or her own learning and asked the teacher to pay attention, to observe well, to trust that growth was natural. In 1915, you noted (Montessori 1915/1997, 13), "The attention which one pays to things is not passive, but corresponds to an activity and an inner meaning. We do not take the world as it is, but as we are." As we are teaching, learning, growing, or stagnating, we shape the world.

Responding to Montessori's work, the author penned this letter, which teachers should find valuable for their own practice and reflection.

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The Key for Me

Throughout my own teaching in Montessori schools, public schools, and universities, I have found both solace and inspiration in your work and words. What has been the key message for me? In a word: observation.

In your work at the University of Rome's psychiatric clinic in the late 19th century, you observed the actions of "mentally ill" children and devised an educational program to meet their needs. For two years, you volunteered your time, calling these years (Montessori 1915/1997, 12) your "first and true titles in the field of pedagogy."

Then, your success with “normal” children in the slums of San Lorenzo in 1907 astounded educational communities in Europe. Casa dei Bambini, Children’s House, became a beacon for child-centered education. About that experience, you wrote (Montessori 1946/1974, 3–4):

Scientific observation has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment. The task of the teacher becomes that of preparing a series of motives of cultural activity, spread over a specially prepared environment, and then refraining from obtrusive interference.

Through careful observation, with scientific passion, you presented the practice of a culturally rich prepared environment. Wow! Children could choose work that was meaningful and interesting and attractive. They could become caretakers of their learning environment. They could repeat work, choose new work, work alone, and work with others. They could establish a work cycle, without interruption. The teacher would observe, guide, spark, and isolate difficulties. Instead of teaching isolated details, the teacher would present the bigger picture, exposing relationships, retaining attention, trying “to hold the intelligence of the child” (Montessori 1915/1997, 7). Within a prepared environment, the teacher supported children in making choices.

Observe: Freedom of Choice

How excited I was to discover that Alexander Graham Bell was instrumental in bringing you to the United States in 1913 and that John Dewey presided at your introductory lecture at Carnegie Hall. *The New York Times* (1913, 3) quoted you as stating, “The child must grow in liberty if he is to grow well, and there is no other way in which his natural development can take place.” Again, the teacher’s observational skills would distinguish between freedom and free fall for the child, the former leading upward and the latter a definite decline. That balance between too much structure and too little scaffolding has sometimes been misunderstood and abused in Montessori classrooms, just as it has in other child-centered classrooms. Liberty cannot exist without authentic choice, and anarchy does not produce liberty. You asked, quite simply, that children be allowed to use freedom wisely, to find joy in learning.

I think that your definition of discovery embraces the notion of liberty. On your second visit to the United States, in 1915, you described the method of discovery (Montessori 1915/1997, 9) as “a phenomenon of development, instead of a phenomenon of taking in” and declared, “With our method, one has the phenomenon of successive development.” In a prepared environment, children have freedom of choice within an intentional learning structure, and the teacher has a view of upward mobility for each child. How vital it is, then, for teachers to observe what motivates each child, what interests and disinterests each. How important it is to dis-

tinguish between a child’s natural development and behavior that interferes with that development. How essential it remains to identify strategies and methodology that work well with children.

Observe: The Method

Dr. Montessori, you asked shortly before your death (Montessori 1950/1978, 1), “Why are there so many difficulties, so many contradictions, so much uncertainty with regard to what are commonly called ‘Montessori Schools’ and the ‘Montessori Method’?” Kahn (1990, 2) answered this question beautifully:

The Montessori idea allows for the dialectic. It produces community among teachers in a common quest for a reconciliation between freedom and discipline, structure and motivation, choice and limit. Such are the creative tensions which make the teacher a decision maker and Montessori pedagogy an applied art.

Montessori methodology is a concept. It was conceived through your own scientific observation, laboratory schools, lectures, teacher training, and writings. It has grown through the hands, heads, and hearts of your many devotees. It is a dynamic process that is only as good as the practical and effective application of keen observation. It implies sparking children’s imagination, providing uninterrupted work cycles, and awakening a genuine thirst for learning.

My favorite quote—the one I use to this day when someone asks me “What exactly is the Montessori method?”—comes from *The Secret of Childhood* (1936/1972). I can almost see your smile when

you replied to repeated questions of methodology (Montessori 1936/1972, 136), “There was no method to be seen, what was seen was a child.” If teachers teach children, not subject matter, they will need to observe the child and lead by following the child. Your cosmic plan for elementary education was fourfold: sow the seeds for knowledge, explore the moral field, allow social growth, and feed a hungry intelligence (Montessori 1948/1973). The “method” follows the child.

And Yet

Recently, Gibbons (2004, 462) asked, “Shouldn’t our courses and lessons be designed to lead our students into the pattern-seeking process and guide them through it?” Through a prepared environment, with both teachers and students in

the habit of thinking—sensorially and intellectually—you have developed a path. One hundred years later, it can still lead us through educative property.

Your granddaughter Renilde (R. Montessori 1988, 3) described your notion of being an effective observer as follows, “When she enjoined us to look at the child, to follow the child, she fully expected that we, as educators, would do so with reverence and awe, with awareness, with common sense and with delight.” I think we, as teachers, need to embrace our own vulnerabilities with some delight. In so doing, we open a door to accept our charges with a bigger, more knowing smile. If an important goal of education is to help life, then Montessori matters. Still.

Thank you,
Paula

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Interested in this letter format as a teaching/learning tool?

Research Project: Letter to a VIP

While first-person narratives and chautauquas are excellent oral techniques for biography studies, a letter format is an engaging written research project. Students will:

- Identify a VIP and describe a major contribution.
- Choose a theme or purpose for the letter.
- Explore 3–5 concepts, demonstrating useful knowledge and attitudes about the concepts.
- Conclude with more specific information on the theme: Why is the VIP still important to study?

How students organize their letters will depend largely on the context of their VIP’s contributions. The personal focus supports an emotional link; brain research tells us this provides an optimal learning opportunity!

Montessori Timeline

1896	First female in Italy to receive a doctorate in medicine
1907	Opened first Casa dei Bambini
1909	Published <i>The Montessori Method</i>
1911	Opening of first Montessori school in the United States
1913	First trip to the United States
1914	Published <i>Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook</i>
1916	Published <i>The Advanced Montessori Method</i>
1932	Published <i>Peace and Education</i>
1936	Published <i>The Secret of Childhood</i>
1946	Published <i>Education for a New World</i>
1948	Published <i>To Educate the Human Potential</i>
1949	Published <i>The Absorbent Mind</i>
1950	Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize Published <i>The Formation of Man</i>
1952	Died on May 6